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ABSTRACT

Modeled after the pioneering French immersion programs developed in Canada in the 1960s, foreign language immersion programs in the United States are designed to enrich the education of native-English-speaking students by teaching them all of their academic subjects in a second language. The goal is for students to become proficient in the second language and develop increased cultural awareness while reaching a high level of academic achievement. Students develop proficiency in the second language by hearing and using it to learn all of their school subjects rather than by studying the language itself. Parents who are considering an immersion program for their child usually have many questions. This digest provides introductory responses to some of the questions most commonly posed by parents such as the following: What is a foreign language immersion program and how does it work? How will learning everything in a second language affect my child's English language and literacy development? Will my child become proficient in the second language? How long will that take? Is immersion an appropriate choice for all children? What can I do to support my child's immersion experience if I don't speak the second language? Immersion education offers an exciting opportunity for students to reach high levels of academic achievement and to acquire strong proficiency in English and another language. Parents who are interested in immersion for their children should become as well informed as possible about this program model. (Author/VWL)

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Modeled after the pioneering French immersion programs developed in Canada in the 1960s, foreign language immersion programs in the United States are designed to enrich the education of native-English-speaking students by teaching them all of their academic subjects in a second language. The goal is for students to become proficient in the second language and develop increased cultural awareness while reaching a high level of academic achievement. Students develop proficiency in the second language by hearing and using it to learn all of their school subjects rather than by studying the language itself.

Parents who are considering an immersion program for their child usually have many questions. This digest provides introductory responses to some of the questions most commonly posed by parents.

What is a foreign language immersion program and how does it work?

In foreign language immersion programs, the regular school curriculum is taught in the immersion language for at least half of the school day. In *partial immersion programs*, instructional time is divided equally between English and the immersion language throughout the elementary grades. In *full immersion programs*, teachers use no English at all in the early grades. In Grade 2, 3, or 4, teachers introduce English language arts and reading for one period per day and gradually move toward an even distribution of English and the immersion language by Grade 5 or 6. In the secondary school grades, immersion students typically have access to at least two course offerings in the immersion language, most often in social studies and language arts.

In U.S. programs, the immersion language is most often a world language spoken by large numbers of people, such as Spanish, French, or Cantonese. In some cases, it is a heritage language being revitalized, as in the Hawaiian and Yup'ik (an Alaska native language) immersion programs that serve indigenous communities. The goal of immersion is to provide educational experiences, beginning in kindergarten and ideally sustained through Grade 12, that support academic and linguistic development in two languages and that develop students' appreciation of their own and other cultures.

One of the key principles of immersion education is that linguistic and cultural knowledge is a resource—the more you know, the better off you are. Immersion education adds knowledge about a new language and culture while building on a child's English language skills and knowledge of U.S. culture.

In order to make academic lessons comprehensible to learners and to support their second language learning, immersion teachers—who are highly proficient in English and the immersion language—use a vast repertoire of instructional strategies as they cover the school district's curriculum (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Snow, 1987). Many of these strategies appear on the *Immersion Teaching Strategies Observation Checklist* (Fortune, 2000) developed by immersion teachers and researchers at a summer institute at the University of Minnesota.[1]

In the early years, immersion teachers realize that their students will not understand everything they say. They use body language, visuals, manipulatives, exaggerated facial expressions, and expressive intonation to communicate their meaning. In kindergarten it is common for students to speak English with their peers and when responding to their teacher. As the years progress, students naturally use more of the immersion language. To draw students into using the language, teachers often use songs, useful phrases, chants, and rhymes and carefully structure the day with familiar routines.

Why should I consider enrolling my child in an immersion program?

Immersion programs are the fastest growing[2] and most effective type of foreign language program currently available in U.S. schools. Most immersion students can be expected to reach higher levels of second language proficiency than students in other school-based language programs (Met, 1998). Becoming bilingual opens the door to communication with more people in more places, and many parents want to provide their children with skills to interact competently in an increasingly interdependent world community.

In addition to reaping the social and economic advantages of bilingualism, immersion learners benefit cognitively, exhibiting greater nonverbal problem-solving abilities and more flexible thinking (see reviews in Met, 1998). It has been suggested that the very processes learners need to use to make sense of the teacher's meaning make them pay closer attention and think harder. These processes, in turn, appear to have a positive effect on cognitive development. However, a high level of second language proficiency is needed in order to experience the positive cognitive benefits that come with bilingualism (Cummins, 1981). From the standpoint of academic achievement, over three decades of studies consistently show that immersion students achieve as well as or better than non-immersion peers on standardized measures of verbal and mathematics skills administered in English (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Genesee, 1987).

How will learning everything in a second language affect my child's English language and literacy development?

Many parents are initially fearful that immersion may have a negative impact on their child's English language development. But research consistently finds that the immersion experience actually enhances English language development (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). It should be noted that full immersion students' English development may lag temporarily in reading, word knowledge, and spelling while instruction is occurring exclusively in the immersion language. However, after a year or two of instruction in English language arts, this discrepancy disappears (Genesee, 1987). It is important for parents to understand that this lag is temporary and to be expected.

In full immersion programs, children develop initial literacy in the immersion language. Many cognitive processes that underlie the ability to read, such as understanding the relationship between the spoken language and the written word, transfer from one language to another (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000). But when the immersion language differs significantly from English (e.g., languages that don't use our alphabet) literacy skills developed in one language will not necessarily transfer to the other language. Immersion students who learn to read first in a language that is markedly different from English, such as Arabic or Japanese, will need to learn and practice literacy skills that are specific to each language (Kanagy, 2001).

It is assumed that immersion students will have consistent exposure to and support for English at home and in the community. Parents need to provide their children with experiences that will enhance their English language and literacy development. For example, they should read

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to their children every day and involve them in games and activities that complement their classroom learning. Research shows that the stronger the development of the native language, the greater the proficiency in the immersion language, so children who enter an immersion program with a strong base in English will succeed more easily than those whose English skills are not as strong.

Will my child become proficient in the second language? How long will that take?

After only 2 or 3 years in an immersion program, students demonstrate fluency and confidence when using the immersion language, and their listening and reading skills are comparable to those of native speakers of the same age. While these skills remain native-like, students' speaking and writing skills lag behind those of native speakers (Johnson & Swain, 1997). Research finds that immersion students' second language lacks grammatical accuracy and does not display the variety and complexity produced by native speakers of the language. Achieving high levels of oral and written proficiency in a second language is a long-term process. A long-term commitment is essential, and parents need to understand that native-like proficiency in every skill area is unlikely. Still, immersion students will have a strong second language base upon which to continue moving toward full proficiency and to develop proficiency in subsequent languages.

Language learning is influenced by many factors, including students' personality and motivation, teacher expectations, parental support, program leadership, and support at both the school and district level. Student success requires the active involvement of all of these stakeholders.

Is immersion an appropriate choice for all children?

The vast majority of immersion programs are open to all students. There is no admission test or pre-screening process. Research findings on the effectiveness of immersion education hold true for a wide range of students, including those from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds (Genesee, 1992). As is sometimes purported, these programs are not intended exclusively for middle- and upper-class Anglo families. In fact, some recent research indicates that immersion may be an effective program model for children who speak a language other than English or the immersion language at home (deCourcy, Warren, & Burston, 2002). It is hypothesized that these learners may benefit from a leveling-of-the-playing-field effect that occurs when all of the students in the class are functioning in a second language. Students who are not native speakers of English are able to be on par with their native-English-speaking peers and enjoy the same kinds of success with learning.

There are, however, many unanswered questions concerning the suitability of language immersion for children with language-based learning disabilities. Research on this topic is scant. Some researchers and immersion practitioners argue that children whose first language acquisition is seriously delayed or who struggle with auditory discrimination skills may be overtaxed in a language immersion program (see review in Genesee, 1992). Previously identified language-processing challenges should be considered prior to enrolling a child in an immersion program. Still, many children with mild learning disabilities, knowledgeable teachers, and supportive families can and do achieve well in immersion programs and develop proficiency in a second language. Parents and educators need not assume that learning in two languages will overtax these children. In fact, many instructional techniques used in immersion are similar to techniques recommended for struggling learners. Understanding how to make language immersion classrooms more inclusive for a broader spectrum of learners is one of many topics of interest to immersion educators.

What can I do to support my child's immersion experience if I don't speak the second language?

Like all parents, parents of children in immersion programs should maintain an active role in their children's education by providing experiences that help develop their English language skills and enhance their cognitive and affective development. They should read to them daily and engage them in activities where they need to apply what they are learning in class. For example, third-grade students studying measurement can do activities at home that involve measuring, such as hanging a picture or baking cookies. Parents should also communicate with the teachers on a regular basis about their children's academic, social, and language development. They should become well informed about immersion education, make a commitment to keep their child in the immersion program, and support their children's use of the immersion language outside the school context, for example, by providing reading materials in the immersion language at home and encouraging a pen/keypal friendship.

While volunteering in classrooms is often a good way for parents to be involved in their child's education, parents need to be careful that their volunteering efforts don't compromise children's use of the immersion language. Some programs designate one afternoon per week for parent volunteers, encourage volunteering during periods when English is used, or have parents volunteer their time for activities that don't involve classroom interaction.

Conclusion

Immersion education offers an exciting opportunity for students to reach high levels of academic achievement and to acquire strong proficiency in English and another language. Parents who are interested in immersion for their children should become as well informed as possible about this program model. It is hoped that this digest will serve as a useful starting point.

Notes

1.This checklist can be found online at http://carla.acad.umn.edu/Immersion/checklist.html.

2.To access the directory of foreign language immersion programs maintained by the Center for Applied Linguistics, see http://www.cal.org/ericcll/immersion.

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